

**Remarks by Michael S. Owen
Ambassador of the United States of America
to the Republic of Sierra Leone**

**Peace Corps 50th Anniversary
Peace Corps Office, Freetown
Monday, April 18, 2011**

- Good afternoon. I am pleased to welcome you here today to mark the fiftieth anniversary of one of America's best ideas--- the Peace Corps. When President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps in 1961, it was a difficult period for the United States and the rest of the world. Wars were raging, governments were changing, and poverty and disease were widespread.
- It would have been easy, at such a time, to be a pessimist. It would have been easy for a wealthy nation like America to turn inward--- to focus only on its own problems and ignore the rest of humanity. It would have been easy to be cynical. To look at all the issues of the day and say, "not my problem."
- But Kennedy chose to be an optimist. To look outward. To realize that the struggles of men and women in Africa, Asia, and the tiniest islands in the Pacific are **OUR** struggles. To acknowledge that we are human beings first, and Americans second.
- Now, once again, the world is facing difficult times, and "Peace on Earth" is considered by some to be an ideal--- an unreachable goal. That is why I am proud to stand here today --- with my American colleagues and our Sierra Leonean counterparts --- and to **re-affirm** that the same optimism that guided President Kennedy is alive and well. To **reassure** you that a new generation of Americans is ready, willing, and able to work with a new generation of Sierra Leoneans. To **celebrate** the fact that Peace Corps is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

- Fifty years after the fact, it is easy to forget just what a radical idea Peace Corps was --- and is. Never before had foreign teachers, health care workers, and farmers actually ***lived and worked in*** the communities they served. Never before had the sons and daughters of the wealthiest nation on earth acknowledged the simple fact that before you can ***help*** people, you have to ***understand*** them. To share their food. To speak their language. To wait in the same lines, ride in the same poda-podas, feel the same joys and sorrows.
- The power of this simple idea is still visible today. And Peace Corps is still unique. There are hundreds --- thousands --- of NGOs at work in the developing world, and many kinds of volunteers. But you will not find ***Peace Corps*** volunteers working in air-conditioned offices. You will not find them riding in four-by-fours, or attending international conferences.
- You ***will*** find them in the villages, in the schools, in the rural communities. You will find them where help is needed most. Where taking time to understand – to empathize – is more important than anything else. Where the contributions of the individual can have the greatest impact on the whole of society. In short, you will find them ***in your hearts***--- which you, the people of Sierra Leone, have so graciously opened to them.
- The impact of this special partnership between the people of Sierra Leone and Peace Corps has been tremendous. The first group of volunteers to arrive in 1962 – only one year after Peace Corps was founded – enjoyed a warm welcome that set the stage for the next ***thirty-two*** years.
- Since I arrived in Freetown six months ago, I have met so many Sierra Leoneans who have fond memories of Peace Corps teachers. Many of this country's public servants, business leaders, and civil society workers can remember Peace Corps volunteers who touched their lives. And --- as any Peace Corps volunteer will tell you --- they were also touched. Each learned from the other. And each came away from the experience changed.
- Even today, the ***doors*** these volunteers opened -- and the ***bridges*** they built – make my job as a diplomat easier. This foundation of mutual

understanding and good will continues to nurture the relationship between our two countries. Not only in Sierra Leone, but across the world, the legacy of Peace Corps helps Americans to communicate more effectively, understand more deeply, and appreciate more sincerely what our friends and partners have to say. The legacy of Peace Corps reminds us each day to **listen** --- and to work as true partners with other nations.

- And memories of Peace Corps persist **outside of Freetown** as well. On my first visit up-country in November of last year, I stopped at a small village in Pujehun District. Although they had not seen a volunteer in **sixteen years**, the villagers had set aside a freshly-painted house in anticipation of Peace Corps' return.
- And of course it is the **return** of Peace Corps to Sierra Leone that we are also celebrating today. The departure of the volunteers during the civil conflict in 1994 was a sad day for both our countries. But the warm welcome that the first new group of volunteers received last June was proof that – although gone for more than a decade – Peace Corps was not forgotten. As we anticipate the arrival of the second group of volunteers in a few months, that freshly-painted house in a rural village is a symbol of renewed friendship and commitment. A commitment to peace and mutual understanding that is just as strong today as it was five decades ago.
- Finally, I would like to say that – although my official title is that of “Ambassador” – I also think of Peace Corps volunteers as ambassadors. They represent the best of America – optimism, open-mindedness, and an adventurous spirit – reaching out to the best of Sierra Leone: warmth, hospitality, and a belief in a brighter future.
- World peace is still possible. It starts with each one of us. Like Peace Corps, it's an adventure. A leap of faith. A goal that may seem always beyond our grasp. But – as President Kennedy would remind us – our **reach** should always exceed our **grasp**.
- Thank you.